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Abstract

Parag Khanna's analysis of American hegemonic decline paints a bleak picture for the future of America's role in the emerging global order. He is correct to emphasize how the misguided policies of the Bush administration have done untold damage to America's credibility, prestige, and overall influence in international affairs. It is thus difficult to find fault with such a sobering analysis of the immense challenges that lie ahead for the next U.S. president in the realm of foreign affairs.

Keywords

Human rights, Globalization, Geopolitics, International relations

Goodbye Hegemony, Hello.?

by Eric A. Heinze

Parag Khanna's analysis of American hegemonic decline paints a bleak picture for the future of America's role in the emerging global order. He is correct to emphasize how the misguided policies of the Bush administration have done untold damage to America's credibility, prestige, and overall influence in international affairs. It is thus difficult to find fault with such a sobering analysis of the immense challenges that lie ahead for the next U.S. president in the realm of foreign affairs.

As an expert on geopolitics, it is not surprising that Khanna's essay frequently makes reference to many of the fundamental principles that have guided the field of International Relations for decades. Utilizing the realist principle of balance of power, for instance, the author suggests we are living in a tri-polar order, with the U.S., the European Union, and China as the great powers. The "Big Three," as Khanna calls them, are competing with one another in the "geopolitical marketplace" to win allies and influence others in a style eerily reminiscent of old-fashioned realist balancing and bandwagoning. The U.S.'s failure to co-opt these "swing states" from the "second world" is even reminiscent of the pessimist outlook of the realist tradition (though perhaps coincidentally), as the author continues to lament the demise of a has-been superpower in this new brand of power politics.

Khanna is certainly right that the balance of power has shifted at the expense of the U.S. He is also right that unlike previous eras of balance of power that were among only European states, this game of power politics is the first truly global and "multicivilizational" power struggle. The most obvious difference that Khanna does not explicitly recognize, however, is that he is talking primarily about an economic, not necessarily military, balance of power. He suggests as much when he downplays the statistics that point to American military supremacy as compared to the more meaningful trends that indicate the U.S. is losing in the geopolitical marketplace. This de-emphasis of military power could be no more obvious than the fact that one of the world's great powers in this new order—the E.U.—scarcely has its own military apart from the separate forces of its members. (And this is to say nothing about the fact that the E.U. is not a sovereign state—a curious omission in a balance-of-power analysis). Despite this, according to Khanna, Europe's economic strength alone is facilitating a "long-term buyout" of its unstable and potentially threatening neighbor Russia.

Yet as numerous scholars have pointed out, economic and military power are two sides of the same coin. However, the logic of the balance of power is premised on the assumption of an anarchical system of sovereign states who are engaged in a struggle for their very survival. States in such a world primarily balance one another militarily, not economically. But it seems that if the new distribution of power the author describes is measured primarily in economic and not military terms, then states no longer perceive their *survival* to be at stake. Cast in this light, America's hegemonic decline is accompanied by the dawn of a new era of international relations where active fear of survival is no longer what motivates states.

Therefore, an important conclusion flowing from Khanna's analysis is that current U.S. military commitments abroad are not only unnecessary for American security, but are contributing

mightily to our precipitous decline. While Paul Kennedy and others have taught us the dangers of military over-stretch, this is only part of America's current predicament. Not only are current U.S. military commitments unsustainable relative to our economic resource base, the continued preoccupation with military dominance is not conducive to the new, evidently less Hobbesian, realities of the global order.

The author's recommendations for the U.S. to remedy this unenviable state of affairs draw from both the balance of power logic that underlies his analysis, as well as the recognition of a global reality based on international cooperation among networks of sub-state (and even non-state) actors. States will continue to compete and balance one another in pursuit of economic growth and influence (if not survival). But international relations are increasingly becoming the purview of domestic technocrats who coordinate with their foreign counterparts in a variety of issue areas to regulate various aspects of international relations. This is why, according to Khanna, "American foreign policy must be substantially more than what the U.S. government directs." One even wonders whether the threat to states' survival has diminished precisely because they decreasingly hold a monopoly over international relations.

Interestingly, the lingering reality of global power competition (albeit not in the military sense) resembles a decidedly realist amoral ethos. This raises some interesting implications for the place that moral concerns like human rights will occupy in states' foreign policy agendas. Khanna's article suggests that to renew our competitiveness in the geopolitical marketplace, the U.S. is going to have to compete with the likes of China to win allies (trading partners?) in the second world, many of whom have little interest in political liberalization. So while the type of power is different in this new version of power politics, the pursuit of an overarching imperative at the expense of "secondary" concerns for human rights and other moral norms will remain an enduring feature of international relations, at least for the foreseeable future. In short, while states may no longer be caught in a perilous struggle for their survival, the same does not necessarily hold true for those individuals living within them. It seems that the state-of-nature analogy to the international system has thus been turned on its head.

Khanna's analysis therefore implies that the danger states pose to one another's existence has diminished. (Non-state actors such as terrorists are a separate issue). At the same time, the threat posed by states to their citizens is likely to remain. Furthermore, human rights implications are sure to surface as global governance becomes increasingly orchestrated by an unaccountable "diplomatic-industrial complex," as opposed to (sometimes) elected governments.

One can therefore only conclude that the place the U.S. will occupy in the new global order remains to be seen, but its arrival will almost certainly not mark America's demise. Perhaps the more urgent concern for readers of this publication is what protections human beings will have from the excesses of power-holders—whatever they may be in the global order that is emerging after American hegemony.

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